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ABSTRACT

Play sessions of two Mexican children (one five and one eight years old) with English-speaking friends were recorded and the use of language play was examined. Language play is viewed as a non-literal, rule-bound use of language that children engage in for its own sake, either cooperatively or competitively. Practice opportunities and children's intense feelings in language play may contribute to the acquisition of a second language. The amount of repetition and the slight modifications on words and sounds that children make could give them phonological and syntactic practice. (Author/JB)

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LANGUAGE PLAY IN CHILD SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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It may be that language play contributes to the acquisition of a second language by children. This paper is a description of language play between a child who is acquiring English as a second language, and a native English-speaking friend. My goals are: first, to describe some clear instances of language play in three taped sessions; and second, to present some suggestions and questions as to the contribution of language play to the child's acquisition of a second language.

Language play is a non-literal use of language which children engage in for its own sake, either cooperatively or competitively. They create their own rules as they engage in language play. Thus, in analyzing a tape or transcript of language play, one can discern its linguistic rules and form.

Before describing the data and discussing the role that child-child language play may have in child second language acquisition, I will explain what "play" means in this paper, and present some hypotheses concerning the contribution of play to learning.

Theory of Play: Relation of Play to Language Learning

The term "play" does not refer to a list of activities, but rather to a mode, a way, a manner of doing any activity. A statement that someone did something "playfully" often expresses this consciousness that play is a mode, not an activity. Playfulness is often characterized by three conditions: players are non-literally oriented, the play is intrinsically motivating, and it is rule-bound. The non-literal orientation is "the consciousness that... play is 'different' from ordinary life." (Huizinga, 1966, p. 51). Play is intrinsically motivating; in other words, it is voluntary, and has its aim in itself.

Some research suggests that play may contribute to learning. Slobin (1964) states that both individual and social play supply a non-threatening atmosphere in which the child can learn more about himself and the world around him. In individual play the child has an opportunity to manipulate his world without fear of loss or punishment. In social play he begins to compare his abilities to those of other children. He learns to observe social rules and norms, and thus learns something about rule-bound behavior in general. Sutton-Smith (1967) hypothesizes that as a result of playing, the child can adopt an "as if" attitude with increasing ease. In addition, in play he may develop a greater number of responses than he would in non-play. Effects of the child's learning may be seen later when he puts this

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greater number of responses to adaptive use.

As far as language learning and play, language play is treated as practice (or a kind of learning) by some researchers (Weir, 1962) while Garvey (in press) as well as Davison (1974) suggest that children play with levels of language as they acquire them.

Data Collection and Subjects

The data are transcripts from four taped sessions. In three sessions (each one-half hour long) Angel, a 7.11-8.1 year-old Mexican child learning English as a second language interacts with Joe, his 8 year-old native English-speaking friend. In the remaining session (13 minutes long) Angel's younger brother, Wigberto (5.1) interacts with two English-speaking peers, Judy and Tammy.

Data Analysis

Language play occurred in three of the four child-child discourse tapes:

1) On March 16, when Angel and Joe put a puzzle together, and acted out a war with toy soldiers,

2) On April 22, when Angel and Joe were copying over their homework, and chatting about school,

3) On July 24, when Wigberto and his friends Judy and Tammy had a game of catch.

Speech samples which were clearly and obviously language play were chosen according to three criteria: the children's non-literal orientation, their intrinsic motivation, and the rule-bound quality of the language.

Non-literal Orientation

In language play, language is used nonreferentially, or expression of a meaning is not the children's primary aim. Sometimes the non-literal orientation, the playful attitude, is evidenced by higher pitch. In this example, Angel and Joe were looking for crayons. Angel emptied the crayons and threw them around.

(4/22/76; Angel, Joe; p. 33)
J-I didn't come here--ta:--um join the junkyard, I just came in ta--here to have fun! [(laugh)] n' do my homework!...
A- [(laugh)]
J-(high:) Hey which is which?
A-/wI/ can witch.
J-/wɪtč/ is /wɑtč/ Wait a m'--<u>mine</u> had a green eraser--and it said--um: wait a minute--"Pedigree--by Empire, U.S.A."

Joe did not really mean to ask Angel which was which, and his high pitch was one signal of that. Angel responded with language play.

Speed, excessive loudness and shrillness are also signs of the non-literal orientation. Here, an argument about the merits of changing places in a game of catch developed into language play with

"yes" and "no".

(7/24/76; Wigberto, Judy, Tammy; p. 19)
W-(to adult) Let's change!
J-No! (laugh) No! No! No! [No!
T- [xx
W-No!=
T- =(Let's) change.
J-(high) Yes! Yes! [Yes!
W- [Yes!] Yes.
J-Yes! [Yes! Yes!
T- [No]=
W- =No, no
J-Yes!
T-No!
J-Mmm-yes! Okay--say "yes"!
T-(shrill) [Ye:ss] goo:d
W- [No:]
J-You're both gonna fall, huh? Oh, no=
W- =Yes, /sɛ/
T-No! No!
W-(laugh) Yes! Yes! Yes.
T-No! No!
W-[(laugh)] hmm
girl-[(laugh)]
W-(laugh) Yes! Yes! Yes

Note that whether a child says "yes" or "no" does not matter; it is not an argument. In general, because of the children's non-literal orientation in play, a section of discourse which appears to be one speech act may be another.

Intrinsic Motivation

Language play is intrinsically motivating: the children engage in language play for the sake of the enjoyment that accompanies it. The play be be cooperative (in some sound play sequences, both children enjoy modifying the sounds) or competitive (sometimes Joe mocks Angel's pronunciation). In the following example of cooperative sound play, Angel and Joe were putting a jigsaw puzzle together. At first, Joe thought he had found where a piece fit, and when he realized that it did not fit, he said, "No-Dong!" Joe's question, "Remember Dong?" refers to a former classmate.

(3/16/76; Angel, Joe; p. 4)
J-Oooh, I got! no--Dong!
A-Doyng!
J-Doyng, I said darn! [Doyng
A- [No, I said doyng] doyng, boom.
J-Doyng, doyng, doyng.
A-Doyng.
J-/Id/ Dong. Ding-dong! That was--remember Dong?

In contrast, there are many examples in which one child teases the other:

(3/16/76; Angel, Joe; pp. 20-21)
A-That is mine--pieces
J-(laugh)
A-Oooh. That very simple
J-Got [it.]
A- [That] very simple
J-(mockingly, slowly) That--is--very--/sImpəl/ What /sImpəl/ mean? [/š/]
A- [/simpəl/!]
J-/impəl/!
A- [Silly! (laugh)]
J- [You're] silly!
A-Your are.
J-Your <u>are</u>.
A-(frustrated) Oooh!
J-Oooh!
A-Only one piece.
J-Only one /piš/ /piš/ /piš/ /piš/ [I can't stop.]
A- [This a old] piece. Piece.
J-/piš/ /piš/. You like /pišəš/?
A-No. I like pieces.
J-What. Whatta you mean--you like /pišəž/? [I like] /pišəs/
A- [Pizza]
A-I like pieces, pizzas.
J-/pɛpsiš/?
A-(sing-song) Pepsi Coli--yeah.
J-/pɛpši koliš/ (laugh) /pɛpši koliš/ /pɛpši/ cola! /pɛpši/ cola!

Note that only at the end, when Angel brought in the word "pizza" and sang the Pepsi Cola commercial was he a cooperative participant in the play.

In sum, language play is intrinsically motivating and may be either cooperative or competitive.

<u>Rules</u>

Linguistic rules are evident in the sense that the children make suprasegmental, lexical or syntactic variations on each other's utterances. In addition, social rules are evident from some of the children's comments.

Keenan's (1974) work on child-child discourse between two native speakers (age 2:9-3:9) provides a useful set of terms for pointing out some of the linguistic rules. One way for children to respond relevantly was to repeat or modify all or a part of the previous utterance. "Functions" is her term for the child's ways of modifying a previous utterance.

In what Keenan calls a "basic focus function," the child repeats a constituent of an antecedent turn exactly as it appeared originally, including intonation:

(3/16/76; Angel, Joe; p. 14)
A-/nə/
J-/nə/

In a "focus + prosodic shift," the child repeats the constituent of an antecedent turn exactly as it appeared, but changes the voice quality or intonation of the constituent:

(3/16/76; Angel, Joe; p. 12)
J-I--will--do it.
A-I will do it.

In a "focus + constituent expansion," the child syntactically expands a constituent within an antecedent turn. The grammatical status of the focused constituent is not altered:

(3/16/76; Angel, Joe; p. 3)
J-One piece at least you do--at least one piece. (sing-song:)
Where-where-where-where
A-Where are you?

In a "substitution function," the child replaces a constituent within an antecedent utterance with a constituent of the same grammatical category:

(3/16/76; Angel, Joe; p. 12)
J-You know what?
A-You know why?

(3/16/76; Angel, Joe; p. 15)
A- [No.] Your are enjoy.
J- [Indeed!]
A- [You--en--] joy. Ah--
J- [/sI/] I--I'm enjoy--what about your enjoy?

Substitution functions, Keenan notes, include Bloom's "expansions," Braine's "replacement sequences" and Weir's "build-ups" and "break-downs."

The next two examples show how Keenan's functions can be applied to the language play data.

EXAMPLE	FUNCTION TYPE
(3/16/76; Angel, Joe; p. 19)	
J-I can't do it. I just can't do it	(focus + constituent expansion)
Do what? Do this.	(substitution)
Do this--	(basic focus)
Do [what.]	(substitution)
A- [Do that.]	(substitution)
(3/16/76; Angel, Joe; p. 12)	
J-You know what?	
A-You know why?	(substitution)
J-You know why? (frustrated with the puzzle) Oh!	(basic focus)
A-(starting to laugh) You know why-- you /not/ why?	(focus + prosodic shift) (substitution: sound play)

Sometimes one child modifies the other child's utterance because a sound, words, or the rhythm remind him of something else. In this example, Joe's repetitions of/d/ and /da/ reminded Angel of the word "daddy" and Angel made up a song:

(3/16/76; Angel, Joe; p. 19)
J-Do that, do what, /d/ (6x)--Umm /da/ (4x)
A-(making up a tune) My Daddy's in Mexico

Here, the words "where are you" reminded Angel of a song:

(3/16/76; Angel, Joe; p. 3)
J-(sing-song) Where-where-where-where
A-Where are you?
J-Where are you?
A-/Id/ (sings:) "Scooby-dooby-doo, [where are you?
J- (sings:) [Where are you?]

In the next example, the rhythm of "very, very funny" reminded Joe of the nursery rhyme, "Mary, Mary Quite Contrary."

(3/16/76; Angel, Joe; p. 18)
A-Very, very funny.
J-Mary, Mary quite [contrary--
A- [(scream:) Get off!] How does your garden grow?

Here, Angel's recitation of Spanish vowels, reminiscent of the drills used in teaching beginning reading in Spanish, reminded Joe of a popular song.

(3/16/76; Angel, Joe; p. 10)
J- [(singing) doo-doo-dee (etc.)
A- [Where is that piece? That more like it. Oh. He! /i/ /u/
[/a/ /e/ /i/ /o/--/u/.]
J-Oooh, ee, ooh, ah-ah, ting tang, walla-walla bing bang, ooh ee, ooh ah-ah ting tang walla-walla bing bang, I calls it" (repeats the above verse 2x) "calls it ooh, ee, ooh ah-ah"
A-(scream:) Oooh!

Language play also seems to be governed by certain social rules. One rule, as Keenan has pointed out in discourse between between two English-speaking children, is Grice's maxim, "Be relevant." When Angel or Joe broke this rule by engaging in long monologues or solos, the other child would persistently repeat an attention-getting utterance.

Contribution to Learning

Two aspects of language play may contribute to language learning: the kinds of practice opportunities, and the intense affective climate.

Practice

The child has many opportunities to hear and produce phonological and syntactic forms. In the "pieces, /pišəš/" example cited previously, the child hears his phonological errors exaggerated and repeated by the native speaker. The acquirer repeats the same word again and again, and modifies his pronunciation. He may develop a sensitivity to the native

speaker's perception of his pronunciation. Syntactic practice could take place when the child substitutes only one or two words, as in the substitution functions

(3/16/76; Angel, Joe; p. 8)
J-Oh good! A teamwork who counts! Oh! Good! Now there's one piece.
A-(starting to laugh) There one piece! [(laugh) Oh]
J-
A-There different piece

or it may take place at times as in the following example, when the native speaker teases the child acquirer until he comes up with a grammatical utterance.

(3/16/76; Angel, Joe; pp. 13-14)
J-That's like on--Ernie and Bert--(roar)
A-No, like a crazy boy! (laugh)
J-(laugh) That's more like it. (high pitch:) What?
A-(chuckling) Like a crazy boy!
J-(even higher:) What?
A-(softer) Like a crazy boy.
J-Like a mazy--like a--a--
A-Crazy!
J-I--I mean--li' li' (pretending to stutter" I mean--I--I--I mean--I mean--I mean--I mean--I mean-- (normal voice:) I mean a crazy?
A-A crazy.
J-A crazy what, a crazy daisy?
A-No, a crazy you.
J-Oh! Oh! Oh!
A-[You are
J-[Oh!]
A-Crazy.
J- Oh! (10x)

So, Angel's original phrasing, "No, like a crazy boy" became "A crazy," then "No, a crazy you" and last, "You are crazy."

Affective Climate: Input and Output

The input to the child acquirer is varied and often confusing; in addition, the topic is rarely the here and now. There are sound effects, and imitations of T.V. and radio material. Songs and nursery rhymes are recited or parodied. Joe often responds to the form of what Angel says, not the meaning.

Angel's output is often nonreferential. He responds to the form of Joe's utterances, even if he can not understand the meaning. He is un-selfconscious about what he says, and makes many contributions to the dialogue. He rarely has to answer questions, and he is not put on the spot to say something about a topic. In these senses, language play offers the child freedom and an enjoyable way for him to use what English he does know.

On the other hand, some of the output suggests that the child acquirer is under a great deal of pressure. He has to respond to the

native-speaking child's input, particularly to the mockery. The pace is often very fast, and he sometimes appears frustrated. The children attend to each other's utterances, and there is pressure from the other child to continue contributing. Unsocial or egocentric speech, then, is rare in language play even though the children are attending to form.

Conclusion

Language play is a non-literal, rule-bound use of language which children engage in for its own sake, either cooperatively or competitively.

It is impossible to prove that children "learn" through language play, but the practice opportunities and the children's intense feelings in language play may contribute to the acquisition of a second language. The amount of repetition, and the slight modifications on words and sounds that the children make could give them phonological and syntactic practice. In Sutton-Smith's terms, they could be learning responses in play which they will later put to adaptive use.

In terms of affective factors, there is potential for strong positive and negative feelings in language play. Positive feelings could be the happiness that the child feels in playing with language, the freedom of not needing to attend to the meaning of the words, and the satisfaction of being in control. The positive feelings may be signs of, in Slobin's terms, a nonthreatening atmosphere. Negative feelings could be frustration at the confusing input and the pressure to respond to the other child, fast enough and appropriately.

Detailed analyses of language play might reveal what elements of language the child could be learning. Some possible projects might be: 1) A longitudinal child-child discourse study, including objective tests of the acquirer's competence in the second language; 2) A fine phonological description of the kinds of modifications that the native speaker makes on the child acquirer's pronunciation; 3) A comparison of features such as topic nomination or number of turns per unit of time in language play and in other types of child-child discourse.

Language teachers have a truism that you learn a language by speaking it. In language play, a child uses the language on his own terms, with strong feelings about it, often with great enjoyment and much laughter, and often with many utterances per unit time. I think that language play could contribute to child second language acquisition in two ways: through its intense affective environment, and because of the attention that the children pay to the form of language. Much of language teaching consists in analyzing small elements of the language for the learners, and giving them directed practice in these elements. Language play may offer the child acquirer a kind of practice which is similar in thoroughness, but different in its hilarity, speed, and intensity.

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